

HERMAN MELVILLE AND ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

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American novelist and poet Herman Melville is a romantic rebel and iconoclast. He presents Islam, its prophet and its followers in a more favourable light than his contemporaries such as Washington Irving. Counterpoising stereotyped representation of Islam either as romantic overindulgence in the senses or the traditional enemy of Christianity and an epitome of despotic rule with a benevolent attitude, he provides an alternative vision of Western and Oriental relationship through an ethos of tolerance and understanding, stemming from a better knowledge of the other.

KEYWORDS: Herman Melville, Islam, Romanticism, Orient

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INTRODUCTION

Ishmael asserts at the beginning of Herman Melville's masterpiece *Moby Dick* that "ignorance is the parent of fear" (35). Whether genuine lack of knowledge or wilful choice to ignore the reality of the other and cling to biased assumptions and prejudice, it leads to fear which breeds the antagonism that has so marked the relations of East and West binary as sharply pointed by Edward Said. However, Melville's narrator is grateful to harbour "Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye" (446). Such levelling of the physical and the spiritual, of the believer and infidel and of the occident and the orient seems to be the basis of Melville's stance which tallies with the themes, characters and imagery his works teem with.

Melville's representation of Islam has attracted scholarly attention since Dorothy Metlitsky Finkelstein's groundbreaking book *Melville's Orienda* (1961). Timothy Marr has insightfully explored *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (2006) while William Potter in *Melville's Clarel and the Intersympathy of Creeds* (2004) tackles Islam from a comparative religious stance and agrees with Djalaluddin Khuda Bakhsh in his unpublished PhD dissertation "Melville and Islam" that Melville's sybaritic and sensual vision of Islam in his earlier works, which had stemmed from his "uncritical acceptance of whatever information he found on Islam" (39) would "change drastically by the time of *Clarel* where the religion is held in much higher esteem" (154) as a result of Melville's (1856-57) visit to the Holy land. Moslem critics however are harsher on Melville's distortion of Islamic faith and assume that "he has been a dupe of Orientalists who preceded him and ha[s] become a tool of those that followed" (Al Disuqi 117).

My contention is that Melville's stereotyped representation of Islam either as romantic overindulgence in the senses or the traditional enemy of Christianity and an epitome of despotic rule is rather to be found in his early

works destined to curry the favour of nineteenth-century American public, the “potboilers” or artistic compromises that earned him wide fame and financial ease. Yet, his more sympathetic and therefore challenging depiction of Islamic faith, its prophet and its followers is reserved for what may be deemed his more *private* and rather “wicked” works like *Moby Dick*, those “eminently adapted for unpopularity” (Potter xiii) as Melville himself pronounced *Clarel* to be, critical and commercial disasters like *The Confidence-Man* and works in which he gives free vent to philosophical speculations on questions of belief and doubt as he does in *Mardi*, without necessarily having to ingratiate himself with an occidental Christian audience.

The opening of Melville’s first novel *Typee* is conspicuously projecting the Islamic Orient onto Polynesian landscape to advertise it to his American audience. “Naked houris” precede “cannibal banquets—groves of cocoa-nuts—coral reefs—tattooed chiefs—and bamboo temples” of the Marquesans echoing the image of Islamic paradise by another Romantic and fellow New Yorker – Washington Irving – in *The Conquest of Granada* where the faithful will be “surrounded by immortal houris” (161). *Mardi* equally begins with visions of “airy arches, domes, and minarets; as if the yellow, Moorish sun were setting behind some vast Alhambra” (*Mardi* 8). Concurrently, in *Recollections of the Alhambra* Irving evokes his living “in the midst of an Arabian tale”, pointing to the *Arabian Nights* which according to Timothy Marr constitute an “important influence on Western attitudes towards Islam” (Marr 13).

Melville’s novels as expected by his readers are fraught with characters and tales from the *Arabian Nights*, the most famous ones being Aladdin who is referred to in *Redburn* in the escapade to London with Harry to “Aladdin’s palace” and in *Moby Dick* where “the whaleman equally makes his berth an Aladdin’s lamp” (*MD* 507). Israel Potter’s son “listened, night after night, as to the stories of Sinbad the Sailor” (*IP* 166) while the whale’s “island bulk” (18) in *Moby Dick* suggests one of these very tales in which Sindbad and his sailors mistaking a whale for an island were picnicking on its back until it plunged and drowned most of them. Even in his long poem *Clarel*, Melville begins the Timoneer’s Story with “those Sinbads had begun/Their Orient Decameron” (*Clarel* 306).

By far the most recurring embodiment of Islam in Melville’s works is the Turk who incarnates at once the despotic enemy of Christianity and the sybarite indulging in his harems. As early as in his second novel *Omoo*, Melville’s characters are repeatedly portrayed “sitting like a Turk” or “seated after the fashion of the Turk.” However, when indicting tyrannical maritime codes, Melville still conventionally vilipends “a despotism like the Grand Turk’s” and rejects the “Turkish code” ruling “one arm of the national defences of a Republic” in *White Jacket*. Yet, following Melville’s recurrent pattern of tolerance, “Sultans, Satraps, Viziers, Hetmans, Soldans, Landgraves, Bashaws, Doges, Dauphins, Infantas, Incas, and Caciques” (*Mardi* 604) are soon merged in a unified benevolent gaze in *Mardi*.

On the other hand, readers’ crave for sensual overtones are met with frequent references to harems and other seraglios in Melville’s works. In the beginning of *Mardi*, stealing a boat was “Harder than for any dashing young Janizary to run off with a sultana from the Grand Turk’s seraglio” (*Mardi* 20) while *Moby Dick* has a whole chapter on the so-called schools or whale harems, the whale patriarch being “a luxurious Ottoman, swimming about over the watery world, surroundingly accompanied by all the solaces and endearments of the harem” (*MD* 391), a “Bashaw defending his ladies from an intruding Lothario” (*Ibid.* 392).

Turks are also seen as the epitome of cunning which is imaginatively extended to ships in *Israel Potter* where the Ranger was disguised as a merchantman that “under the coat of a Quaker, conceal[ed] the intent of a Turk” (*IP* 96). Yet this negative image is elsewhere undermined by a romantic drawing of “The three shrouded masts [that] looked like the

apparitions of three gigantic Turkish Emirs striding over the ocean” to describe the main-top at night in *White Jacket*, and of “the white sails [that] glistened in the clear morning air like a great Eastern encampment of sultans” (*Redburn* 240).

Turks are as aptly symbols of tyranny as they are of “barbaric jauntiness” (*IP* 56). In *Israel Potter*, Allen “the unconquered soldier” addresses the crowd of British starers likening them to Turks: “You Turks never saw a Christian before” (*IP* 144). Yet, the same Allen is showed “like an Ottoman, bowing over his broad, bovine forehead, and breathing the words out like a lute” (*IP* 145) when addressing a “lovely charmer”, a token of the Ottoman’s seducing gallantry.

The Barbary Coast is another handy antagonistic representation of Islamic lands with its inherent barbarism and threat in contemporary American imagination. Although piracy was “a constant in the maritime world, and strongly affiliated with the slave trade” (Blum 122), Melville is not content to abide by existing hostile feelings towards “Algerine despotism” (Marr 34), he also ascribes barbaric characteristics to Europeans at the same time as he provides sympathetic hints at the land of Barbary.

In *Redburn*, Riga purposed “taking them to Barbary, and selling them all for slaves” (*Redburn* 260) to frighten his passengers. However, Irish emigrants “looked like an irruption of barbarians” (*Ibid.* 198) investing Liverpool docks and “to protect this detachment of gentility from the barbarian incursions of the “*wild Irish*” emigrants, ropes were passed athwart-ships, by the main-mast, from side to side” (*Redburn* 242), extending barbaric traits to Western Irishmen.

In *Moby Dick* as well as *Mardi*, Melville uses the Algerine coinage for a purpose species to highlight their dangerousness, whether in the Cetology chapter: “Algerine Porpoise - A pirate. Very savage... Provoke him, and he will buckle to a shark” (*MD* 144) or in an Ichthyology survey including “the Algerines; so called, probably, from their corsair propensities” (*Mardi* 42). Conversely, Ishmael’s wise decree “it is but well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in” (*MD* 7) occurring just after a reference to “barbarous coasts” shows a benevolent attitude to all the peoples of the earth, the inmates of this planet. Similarly, the shores believed to be “pestiferously barbarous” (*MD* 110) were only touched by whale-ships, ascribing to whalers a highly tolerant attitude and counterbalancing hitherto detrimental connotations of barbarity.

Of all the stock imagery employed by Melville for Islamic Orient, the turban and the crescent appear to be the most conspicuously appealing to his nineteenth-century readership. They were readily used by Washington Irving in association with death and fighting and symbolic of Christians’ foes. Irving relates the events of the conquest of Granada, when “Christian knight and turbaned infidel disputed, inch by inch, the fair land of Andalusia, until the Crescent, that symbol of heathenish abomination, was cast down, and the blessed Cross, the tree of [their] redemption, erected in its stead” (*Irving Chronicle* 2). The sight of a “hostile turban” or descrying a “turbaned host” of Moors filled his narrative with awe as the two opponents “continued their struggle in the waves, and *helm* and *turban* rolled together down the stream” (*Ibid.* 158, italics mine).

Melville, however, endows these two symbols with a more favourable connotation. As early as *Omoo*, is found a “Bashaw with Two Tails” alluding to the turban made of a shirt with the two sleeves hanging behind. In *Clarel*, where Moslem characters are most likely to be found, “First went the turban--guide and guard” (*Clarel* 133) denoting Djalea’s double trusted role towards the community of pilgrims. The friendly relationship between the two faiths is serenely depicted as early as Canto 8 of Part One, in “Among brave Turbans freely roamed the Hat” (*Clarel* 29), the Hat being Christian Nehemiah (Gale 459).

Whatever hostile or disparaging overtone ascribed to Moslems is made, not in the reference to a turban, but simply to knots as in Jack Chase's vivid rendering of the battle of Navarino in *White Jacket*, with the Turks' "top-knots floating on their shaven skulls, like black snakes on half-tide rocks". Turbans are rather life-saving devices as when the carpenter in *Moby Dick* intends to "have [him] thirty separate, Turk's-headed life-lines" (MD 468) tied to the coffin-buoy; or in the *Encantadas* Sketch Eight "Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow" when abandoned Hunilla "as a last resort catches the turban from her head, unfurls and waves it" (PT 159) over the jungles towards the ship to be seen and rescued. Both characters will owe their lives to a sort of turban.

Melville further imparts romantic undertones to the turban and the crescent to enhance the beauty of his descriptions. In *Mardi*, Nora-Bamma, the Isle of Nods is seen as "round and green, a Moslem turban by us floats" (*Mardi* 265) while in *White Jacket*, "near cape Horn High, towering in their own *turbaned* snows, the far-inland pinnacles loomed up, like the border of some other world". The "White turban like snow-wreath" in *Clarel* rivals with the "moss-turbaned, armless giant" of *Pierre* (25.V). And in *Moby Dick* when Melville "celebrates a tail", he has recourse to Islamic image of a crescent to delineate the beautiful curve of the whale's tail when he claims that "In no living thing are the lines of beauty more exquisitely defined than in the *crescentic* borders of these flukes" (MD 375).

The most important embodiment of Islam is undoubtedly its Prophet Mohammed who is namely mentioned only five times in all Melville's production. The first instances occur in *Moby Dick* in "a Prophet who prophesy'd of Mahomet" (MD 458) and *Mardi* in "the arches of Mahomet's heavens" (*Mardi* 230) where the Prophet is referred to as Mahomet following widespread contemporary English transliteration that is also used by Irving in his famous romanticized biography *Mahomet and his Successors* (1850). However, Melville resorts to a closer Arabic spelling in *White Jacket*: "like that old exquisite, Mohammed, who so much loved to snuff perfumes and essences, and used to lounge out of the conservatories of Khadija, his wife, to give battle to the robust sons of Koriesh" and in *Pierre*: "and it was one of his own little femininesses—of the sort sometimes curiously observable in very robust-bodied and big-souled men, as Mohammed, for example—to be very partial to all pleasant essences" (*Pierre* 94). These passages underscore complementary qualities of robustness and masculinity with the love of perfumes and delicacy which are truly the attributes of the Prophet of Islam as asserted by himself in a saying related by Al-Tirmidhi (Hadith 1388): "I was made to love three things from your world: women, and perfume, while the comfort of my eye is in salat" i.e. prayer. Still in *Pierre*, "the Grand Master of a certain mystic Society among the Apostles" excuses his lack of temperance by claiming that "Mohammed hath his own dispensation" (*Pierre* 291), thus illustrating Melville's ignorance of Islamic precepts rather than deliberate offence just as the Ramadan chapter in *Moby Dick* involves a sort of Lent performed by Queequeg albeit not in accordance with Islamic practice, acknowledging Queequeg as "a member of the first Congregational Church" (MD 88) to which all humanity belongs. After his journey to the Levant and his better acquaintance with the Islamic world, Melville is able to be more accurate in *Clarel* as to the practice of fasting in Derwent's rebuke to Belex (*Clarel* 314-16) while as early as *Omoo* a whole chapter called "Hegira or the flight" shows the narrator using a calendar in a similar fashion to Islamic calendar that starts with the Prophet's flight from Mecca to escape persecution and build a state at Medina.

In Melville's most overtly philosophical and spiritual novel *Mardi*, prophet Foni cannot be said to represent Prophet Mohammed, even though "distinguished for the uncommon beauty of his person" as pretended by Finkelstein (166-67) for he bore an "ineffaceable tattooing" (*Mardi* 342) and his band were dispersed and killed and he himself slain as a solitary old vagabond. It is rather Alma that is imaginatively construed as a parallel to the prophet of Islam. Indeed,

during the characters' visit to Serenia, allusions to Islamic faith and the teachings of its prophet abound in an analogy drawn by Melville with the true teachings of Alma as practised in this island away from the corrupted religion of Mardians. "They declare that the prophet himself was the first pilgrim that thitherward journeyed: that from thence he departed to the skies" (*Mardi* 324), echoing the night journey of the Prophet of Islam from Mecca to Jerusalem and thence to the seventh heaven. In Chapter 184: "Babbalanja Relates to Them a Vision", Babbalanja is seen "advancing in his snow-white mantle", a token of Islam. He describes his trip with an angel, delineating sights of paradise and visions of the seven skies in which he gained wisdom and learned more about his faith, hence recalling the miraculous trip to heaven made by Prophet Mohammed to which Irving devotes the whole of Chapter 12 in his biography. In *Mardi*, the words of the old Alma priest are hailed as "Poetry!" cried Yoomy; "and poetry is truth! He stirs me" (*Mardi* 629) just as the Koran was considered at first by Koreishites as poetry and beguiled them through its sweetness and rhetoric while revealing deepest truths. The old man in *Mardi* declares "We have no king; for Alma's precepts rebuke the arrogance of place and power" (*Mardi* 627), another similarity with Prophet Mohammed who in the words of Gibbon "despised the pomp of royalty" and "observed without effort of vanity the abstemious diet of an Arab" (54).

When introducing his characters, Melville subtly draws the line between Oriental allusions and Islamic references. Such is the case with Fedallah who "has often puzzled and dissatisfied critics" (Isani 386). He is not meant to represent Islam even if his name literally means "sacrifice of God" in Arabic for he is referred to as Parsee more often than as Fedallah in *Moby Dick*, hinting at his Zoroastrian creed rather than connecting him with Islam. Finkelstein's far-fetched explanation as "fidai" or assassin, a sort of kamikaze sent to destroy blasphemous Ahab (229-39) is less likely than his being Ahab's fiendish alter-ego, ready to sacrifice himself on his god's fiery altar. He is more connected with fire and lightening than any image of Islamic undertones. Ahab blindly clings to his prophesies in a way similar to Macbeth falsely allured into safety by the witches "till Burnam wood comes to Dunsinane" (*Macbeth* V, iii, 2) and firmly believing that no man born of a woman can kill him.

Captain Ahab is not only "alien to Christendom" (Marr 227) but also unlikely to belong to an Islamic community – despite the "numerous references to the Islamic world" pointed by Timothy Marr – for he has not only thwarted the holy ceremony of Baptism in a diabolical manner, "*Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!*" but he has also perverted the Islamic shahada or profession of faith when stating that "There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod" (449).

The Melvillean character who is most likely to embody Islamic features is *Clarel*'s Djalea in whom Melville has concentrated "the serene confidence that befits the son of an emir" (Rollyson 64). Though a Druze of Lebanon, Djalea pronounces the shahada "No God there is but God," and invokes Moslem name for God: "Allah preserve ye, Allah great!". His description in "The man and pipe in peace as one" lays emphasis on his peace of mind in accordance with the essence of Islam which is derived from the word "salam" meaning peace in Arabic.

Islamic virtues of hospitality, chivalry, honesty and magnanimity are promoted in Melville's literary production. In *The Confidence-Man* it is asserted that "hospitality being fabled to be of oriental origin, and forming, as it does, the subject of a pleasing Arabian romance, as well as being a very romantic thing in itself" (299), it is always welcomed on every shore including those of the Mississippi. Knighthood and gallantry originated in Moslem lands as put forward in *Clarel* "And chivalry, with all that breed/Was Arabic or Saracen/In source, they tell." (Part II Canto 27) and as extolled in Irving's "Spanish Romance" with "the high-minded school of Saracenic chivalry" and in his *Recollections of the*

Alhambra. Clarel further tips the balance in favour of Islam in comparison with Christian behaviour in the story of a European merchant cheated by his own co-religionists and honestly paid back by Moslems:

A merchant Frank on Syria's coast,
 That in a fire which traveled post,
 His books and records being burned,
 His Christian debtors held their peace;
 The Islam ones disclaimed release,
 And came with purses and accounts (Part IV Canto 12).

The same canto relates Caliph Omar's noble refusal to pray on the church yard to save it from being annexed by Moslems which has failed to be met with a corresponding magnanimity by "Christian knights, how ill conformed/The butchery then to Omar's prayer/And heart magnanimous" (*Ibid*).

These Islamic values cannot be dismissed as mere romantic colouring, they herald an unmistakably benevolent attitude toward the Moslem "other" in Melville's deep inter-religious crosscurrents. Melville intersperses his works with affinities and common traits joining Islam and Christianity to be ultimately summed up in his most religious-bent poem *Clarel* by Derwent's remark, setting a model for ending confessional conflicts in the person of Moslem Djalea:

This policy
 (Djalea's) bred now a pleasing thought
 In Derwent: 'Wars might ended be,
 Yes, Japhet, Shem, and Ham be brought
 To confluence of amity,
 Were leaders but discreet and wise
 Like this our chief.' (Part III Canto 8)

Melville's novel *Redburn* features a floating chapel on the docks of Liverpool where "On Sundays [the sexton] hoisted the Bethel flag, and like the *muezzin* or cryer of prayers on the top of a Turkish mosque, would call the strolling sailors to their devotions". "Sundays, Bethel and Muezzin and mosque", deriving from the three monotheistic religions, are all equally associated in the same metaphor for religious devotion and faithful worship. Tashtego on the top of the whale's head shouting to other sailors in *Moby Dick* seemed like "some Turkish Muezzin calling the good people to prayers from the top of a tower" (329) while ambergris is a pretext for drawing parallels between Christian and Muslim rituals in "The Turks use it in cooking, and also carry it to Mecca, for the same purpose that frankincense is carried to St. Peter's in Rome" (391).

In "The Piazza" tale when "seventy years since, from the heart of the Hearth Stone Hills, they quarried the Kaaba or Holy Stone, to which, each Thanksgiving, the social pilgrims used to come" (1), Melville recourses to Islamic imagery of pilgrimage to the Kaaba, merging Thanksgiving feast with Hadj celebration in transreligious analogy.

As a travel writer *par excellence* Melville extols the unifying virtue of pilgrimage in *The Confidence-Man* where he unites pilgrims of differing faiths; “As among Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, or those oriental ones crossing the Red Sea towards Mecca in the festival month, there was no lack of variety” (10). *Clarel* which is at once *A Poem and a Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* combines literature with travel to express Melville's “journey of universalism” (Ferrantello) and transcend religious differences. The “Easter Fire” Canto best epitomises Melville's way of unifying Christian and Islamic faiths:

To Christ the Turk as much as Frank
 Concedes a supernatural rank;
 Our Holy Places too he mates
 All but with Mecca's own (Part III Canto 16),

while in Canto 37 “Rofe”, the reader is invited to “Look, by Christ's belfry set,/ Appears the Moslem minaret!” and behold how “The Saracen shaft and Norman tower/In truce stand guard beside that Dome”, to symbolize their peaceful proximity.

Like one of his characters in *Israel Potter*, Melville is “an untrammelled citizen and sailor of the universe” who uses the trope of travel and adventure to advocate through his famous Ishmael “cultural and religious tolerance, revelling in what he perceives as the universal connections between human beings” (Roolison 153). Ishmael who is supposedly cast out as a “wild man; his hand … against every man, and every man's hand against him” (as found in Genesis 25:9–17) calls his fellow humans to “squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness” (398). Rather than an outcast or rejected son, he is “one whose name contained the promise of divine redemption” (Sten 190) for it means in Hebrew “God shall hear” and hence is Melville expecting his written words of inter-religious dialogue to be heard specially as Ishmael, the father of the Arab nation and ancestor of the Prophet of Islam, is symbolically saved in *Moby-Dick* by the ship purposefully named Rachel after the mother of the Jewish tribes.

Irving who was more acquainted than Melville with Islamic sources displays less tolerance and understanding of this religion and its prophet, his “presentation frequently challenges Muslim orthodoxy” (Einboden 44). Melville, however, seems to be more abiding by Islamic orthodoxy. He has only used “Mussulmans” or “Islamites” to refer to Muslims whereas Irving repeatedly mentioned “Mahometans” which connotes worship of Muhammad and is offensive to Muslims who worship no other God but Allah.

Melville offers an alternative vision of Western and Oriental relationship through an ethos of tolerance and understanding, even condoning. His world-famous Ishmael, the New Englander Presbyterian Christian, learns to open up to other religions and cultures. Though a “good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church” (68) Ishmael is none the less ready to “turn idolator” (68) and even finds justification for it in his own religious precepts: “to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me” - an attitude reciprocated by Queequeg who seems to think “It's a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians” (76).

CONCLUSIONS

A romantic rebel and iconoclast, Melville overtly condemned missionary proselytism in the South Sea Islands. Yet, his greatest achievement in his contribution to inter-religious dialogue is his subtle counterpoising of a conventionally Orientalist image of Islam with a more favourable, open and even admiring view which is particularly pertinent in these days of rampant Islamophobia.

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